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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses what educational leadership might look like at the start of the 21st century, specifically within the context of Alberta. It also provides a brief synopsis of some of Alberta's major reforms of the past decade, and it presents some of the key findings and recommendations of a 1998 study entitled "An Analysis of Attitudes and Beliefs about Public Education in Alberta." It then links this work to the key findings and recommendations of recent research. School reform in Alberta suggests that educational leaders challenge their beliefs and assumptions and leads to the following questions: (1) How can the international components of teacher education and graduate programs at postsecondary institutions be made most meaningful? (2)How can the structure and function of schools be reconceptualized to maximize the possibilities offered by information and communication technologies? (3) What is the relationship between educators' traditionally conservative assumptions about schooling and imposed change by legislators? and (4) What is the limited capacity of public schools to change and the challenge this presents to the schools' credentialing, social, and custodial functions? (Contains 30 references.) (DFR)

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Education Reform in Alberta: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Education Reform in Alberta: Where Do We Go From Here?

The intent of this paper is threefold: First of all, we are most interested in the theme of the symposium, "Leadership for the 21st Century", and, as such, our primary focus will be to offer some thoughts about what educational leadership might look like at the dawn of a new millennium. However, we would like to situate these thoughts within a Canadian context, specifically within the context of our own province - Alberta. In order to do this, we must have as our second aim to take a step back and to provide a brief synopsis of some of Alberta's major reforms of the past decade. In addition, we wish to locate the beginnings of our thinking within our research. Therefore, our third aim is to present some of the key findings and recommendations of a 1998 study entitled *An Analysis of Attitudes and Beliefs About Public Education in Alberta* (Spencer, 1999) and, then, to link this work to the key findings and recommendations of the recent research of Webber and Hunter (1999), Robertson and Webber (1999), and Webber and Robertson (1998). By making connections between the local Alberta study and the international research projects, we offer what we envision to be a 21st Century approach to educational leadership.

The Context

Alberta's reform story is not unlike that of many other Western nations for which government policies of the late 1980s and the 1990s have been driven, to a large extent, by New Right, neoliberal responses to the economic pressures of globalization. For Alberta, the story began in 1992 with Ralph Klein assuming the Conservative Party leadership to become the province's Premier. Shortly thereafter, plans for an aggressive attack on the provincial deficit ensued: Budgets were to reflect a 20% spending cut within two years, the public sector was to be massively restructured in the name of efficiency and accountability, and taxes were not to increase. These reforms were to be sweeping, deep, and rapidly implemented.

In terms of education, the reform story reads like this: The 'Business Plan' of Alberta Education outlined "the most comprehensive changes ever introduced to a provincial education system" (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, p. 219). It promised to "substantially alter the character of the education system," and to usher in an era in which "schools and business can work in partnership with parents and the community," in order to "ensure our competitiveness in a global economy" (Alberta Education, 1994). In January 1994, all civil servants took a 5% salary rollback, funding cuts to education were announced at 12.4%, and cuts to Early Childhood Services were announced at 50%. The number of school boards in the province was reduced from 141 to 68, municipal school tax revenues were henceforth to be directed to a central fund for redistribution for 'equalization', and block funding was introduced to prevent the movement of dollars between the budget areas of instruction, support, and capital. School councils to consist of parents, the principal, students, and community representatives were mandated, and site-based management was instituted, requiring individual schools to budget 'lump sum' allocations according to provincial guidelines. In promoting parental choice, schools were to respond to the market forces of competition and mobility in a system where 'the dollar follows the student' and funding is determined by enrollments, and in the provision for charter schools, which were meant to provide an alternative to the public system. In order to step-up accountability, province-wide testing was increased and schools were required to provide not only student achievement results but also to report on parental and student satisfaction (Bruce & Schwartz, 1997). Indeed, as had been promised by Alberta Education's Business Plan, these reforms did "substantially alter the character of the education system" (Alberta Education, 1994).

The Alberta Research

In 1997 and 1998, after the reforms had been fully implemented and the dust had begun to settle, we embarked on a research initiative designed, in part, to assess the 'post-reform mood' in the aftermath of such significant and important changes. Data were collected from the discussions of a series of focus groups consisting of range of stakeholder representatives: school students, parents, community members, school trustees, members of the business community, teachers, school support staff, educational administrators at all levels, preservice teachers, graduate students in Education, and university professors. The key findings of this project were summarized under three headings: "Where We Are", "Contemplating Change", and "Moving Ahead". These headings reflect the strong sense participants had of considering education at a pivotal point in time, at a significant juncture or crossroads.

Where We Are

More than any other topic of discussion, participants alluded to concerns of a 'global' kind. They were overwhelmed by the enormity of a larger social, political, and economic context which cannot but impinge upon schools and the lives of students and their families. They were concerned about the pace of change and about the pressures of the technological advances with which our schools cannot keep up. They cited, as particularly disconcerting, increasing poverty, the growing gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', and the challenges our diverse and multicultural communities present. At the same time, they talked about the possibilities, which emerge as a result of the increasingly blurred boundaries within a global community: world-scale environmental awareness and social consciousness, international connections and cross-cultural links. In this light, they wondered how and if schools, as they presently exist, will be able to meet the needs of students whose worldview is beginning to look both immensely larger and profoundly different from the one we had as youngsters.

Participants were frustrated with what seem to be decreasing levels of support for public education, both in terms of funding and in terms of advocacy. Agreeing with those such as Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) and Young and Levin (1998), participants argued that the many challenges facing public education cannot be addressed by schools alone. The education of our children must be seen as important enough to be supported by the wider community.

Participants acknowledged that politicians and senior policy makers also struggle to make sense of the same changes confronting those in schools. The government has remained committed to a reform agenda for ensuring an "Alberta Advantage" through "strong financial management" and "high standards" for "quality education," so that our students will be among the best in the world (Alberta Education, 1994, 1996). However, participants were not convinced that the 'means' by which our government intends to achieve this 'end' involve sound approaches to educational change. They argued that there has been little evidence that the initiatives of the past several years are the kind of reforms that have truly improved the learning experiences of our children or the quality of education in our schools. Moreover, participants also questioned the 'ends' of such a reform plan. They wondered about the values and ideals motivating many of the new educational objectives in our province - those they described as competitive, corporatist, and capitalist - and they wondered about whose interests are being served by such an agenda.

Stakeholders of this study believed that they have been, and continue to be, left out of the decision-making process. They were suspect and cautious about the reforms that have come from above. In tune with scholars such as Darling-Hammond (1995), Elmore (1990), Fullan (1993), and Tyack and Cuban (1995), who have written extensively about educational change, participants realized that imposed, 'top-down' directives for reform are, for the most part, ineffective; such

changes are resisted or ignored. Participants also voiced a range of frustrations associated with the "loose-tight" coupling Knight, Lingard and Porter (1993) refer to in explaining that devolved or decentralized governance structures are more about 'means' than 'ends'. In these reforms, local responsiveness and community participation are recognized; yet independence and autonomy are curtailed by significant central controls over funding and accountability.

Contemplating Change

This does not mean that the participants of the study do not want public education to change - they do. For the most part they believed that schools, as they presently exist, are not responding to our changing world and our changing society. However, participants argued that, in addition to receiving education as preparation for a competitive workplace, children must also learn to understand the world beyond school as a place where caring for one another, cooperating and working together, and building upon a common good through responsible and democratic citizenship are priorities.

So it seems that, while our government moves its reform agenda ahead on promises to bring Alberta to the forefront of a global *economy*, many of our educational leaders are most concerned with recognizing the imperatives of a global *community*. Participants acknowledged the importance of working *with* the government - they endorsed a collaborative approach to reform - but they argued that, government or not, initiatives must be taken to push forward in a way that sees change beyond a view that is restricted by a limited and local political agenda, to a recognition of the importance of social justice in an ever-expanding global community. Giddens' (1999) recent argument echoes the belief of participants: Globalization is misunderstood "if it is treated as only, or even primarily, economic" (p. 30). Participants argued that, with a broader conception of globalization in mind, the first step in our province should be to build a vision for public education, a common focus, that we can *all* 'buy into'.

That said, participants very clearly recognized the difficulties associated with this endeavor: When we talk about public education, our ideas and our opinions are as diverse as our individual backgrounds and perspectives. Besides, discussions around reform are impassioned and emotionally charged. The topics we debate touch us not only in personal ways, in terms of the connection they have to our own children and our own lives, but in public ways, in terms of how they affect our communities and, indeed, our society as a whole. In the discussions about purposes, aims, and visions for public education, participants of this study became caught in a problematic paradox of a liberal humanist ideology which tends to underscore our understandings of democracy: The values of fairness, justice, and equality, and those of individual rights and freedoms are often incompatible and contentious.

Participants also recognized that change is not easy. It causes discomfort and anxiety and, more often than not, we want to hang on to the familiar as a way of coping with the unknown. Change requires that we challenge deeply ingrained values and assumptions, that we give up the control we have in what is secure and known, or that we relent or relax the control we have over 'territory' or authority.

In addition, participants found themselves at in impasse within a certain tension: On one hand, they were, to a great degree, preoccupied with the local consequences and implications of provincial reforms. Much earnest and serious discussion of a 'problem-solving' nature was devoted to ways in which school leaders might cope with and understand, or work through and around recent changes. On the other hand, participants voiced frustration at even having to deal with the innumerable challenges associated with the local- and school-level implementation of such reforms when far greater educational concerns loom on a more 'global' horizon - concerns such as those mentioned

earlier associated with a larger or broader societal context. In addition, reflected in participants' comments was the sentiment that, although the 'top down' initiatives of government policies were, for many, already becoming yesterday's tired news and, as one principal put it, "nothing more than a big inconvenience," these changes remain, nevertheless, extremely demanding, time-intensive, and, moreover, often tied to high stakes mechanisms for accountability. So, in many cases, just surviving on a day-to-day basis prevents school personnel from imagining a different reality, beyond that which requires constant attention to the 'here and now'. Although participants repeatedly expressed the desire for a more global perspective from which to talk about public education reform, they also acknowledged that educational leaders, preoccupied with 'crisis management' and 'damage control', remain paralyzed in the mire of the immediate and the local.

Moving Ahead

Despite concerns and misgivings regarding change, participants repeatedly expressed the desire to move ahead. Ironically, as much as the government-initiated reforms of Alberta have been the 'thorns in the sides' of most participants, it seems that these changes have also become the catalyst for an incredible amount of important discussion and debate. The struggles with the practicalities of reform policies have resulted in the beginnings of some crucial understandings about what does not work and what might. Moreover, the legislated changes that have required schools to be more accountable to parents and more open to the community are changes that participants of this study agreed are important.

That said, again participants wondered about the 'means' to this 'end'. They questioned the motives and the propriety behind what seems to be a market-driven agenda for public education. For example, they were suspect about the new focus on specific learning outcomes and standardized achievement exams when, they argued, these measures only account for a very a small part of what it means to be a successful learner, and they were highly critical of the involvement of businesses and corporations in public education.

Participants of this study felt strongly that the public should be involved in public education. Schools need to be embraced by supportive individuals and citizen groups. We must all be willing toaccept, in some way, responsibility for the education of our children. In this light, participants valued the involvement of parents in schools, in both instructional and noninstructional roles. As well, participants were extremely aware that by including, integrating, or making connections with a range of social agencies and community organizations, students and staff in schools can only benefit. Opening the doors, inviting people in, eliminating the 'walls', and breaking down the barriers between schools and the world outside the traditional boundaries of public education were seen by participants as priorities. This, they conceded, requires new understandings about who a teacher is and who a leader is, about who makes the decisions, and about who is accountable. It also requires new understandings about where schooling happens and about what learning and teaching constitute.

Participants saw educational change as difficult, complex, uncomfortable and, at times, frustrating and disillusioning. However, their comments reflected those of Fullan (1993), Hargreaves (1994), and Sarason (1990), who remind us that in order for our efforts to result in "second order," proactive, deep, and lasting changes, as opposed to "first order," reactive, superficial, and short-lived changes, the debate must be continuous. Participants also recognized that diverse and opposing perspectives are a necessary and healthy feature of our debates about public education which will result in the valuable "creative democratic tension" required to develop a shared ideal for education and to move beyond changes and reforms that are superficial and ineffectual (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Knight et al., 1993).

Where Do We Go From Here?

And so, in light of this research, we must ask the following questions: Where do we go from here? What is it that those in leadership roles in places like Alberta should consider? What should we do? As is probably more than obvious to those familiar with current reform literature, this account of an Alberta case is not unique. Because the key findings of this study reflect and parallel larger trends, the recommendations originally offered a year ago in this study's summary report were not so much original as they were meant to substantiate what others continue to advocate. They are as follows:

To begin, public education must become a truly public endeavor. We can no longer equate the word 'education' with the word 'school', and we must open our minds to consider all possibilities and alternatives. This involves three thrusts. First, we must not only expect schools to uphold and sustain society; we must also expect society to uphold and sustain schools. Schools need to be responsive, but they also need to be supported. This means going beyond superficial changes in reforms such as those sometimes associated with shared decision-making and school-community partnerships. It means entering into reciprocal relationships of trust, respect, and empathy. It means working together - not at cross purposes and not in competition with one another - to develop some common understandings and goals. It is a messy, contentious, and often uncomfortable and frustrating process. It involves thoughtful and hard work, and it requires that we challenge what we are certain of, and what we take for granted.

For example, we must be prepared to revisit the values and ideals that underpin the institutions within which we work. We can no longer assume, for instance, that white, middle-class understandings of the democratic process are always suitable and appropriate in our dynamic and heterogeneous communities. We must work towards a democratization that embraces the difficult process of genuine involvement and consensus-building. This means that we must carefully consider our notions of plurality and diversity. Even our conception of the 'stakeholder', a label we often use, becomes problematic. It forces us to see individuals as merely members of a larger group. It categorizes us according to a fixed role, and leaves little room for the personal or the unique. Because of this, alternative understandings of democratic processes must be considered. For example, approaches which recognize multivocality, and that which is personal and autobiographical are crucial. In respecting all voices and all views, alternatives are presented, creative possibilities emerge and, moreover, as authors such as Kanpol (1992) explain, 'counterhegemonic' resistance is embraced in order that existing structures are continually challenged and transformed. In this vein, educational goals and visions must also be seen as temporal and contextual. They must be revisited continually in order to fit ever-changing circumstances.

Second, we can no longer see schools in a traditional sense. As the participants of this study suggested, we must be prepared to eliminate barriers and to see boundaries as permeable. Interestingly, however, a close look at what participants described reveals a subtle irony. While the importance of inviting others 'in' was acknowledged, participants talked about schools with the assumption that the school is the 'centre', the place *to* which others must come and *from which* connections should be initiated. Although this was likely not intentional, it reveals a tendency we have to revert to traditional, conservative understandings when we think and talk about education. We take for granted the structures of schooling as they exist - from classrooms, to schedules and time allocations, to power relationships, to teaching practices - as fixed and consistent 'givens'. We consider ourselves open and amenable to change, yet, in many ways, we are merely paying lip service to the prospect. When it comes right down to it, we assume and, indeed, we expect that change will happen in our terms and on our turf. Beyond this, we seem unable to imagine the possibilities. On one level, we recognize the need to think 'outside of the box'. On another level, even the language

we use to talk about change reveals how difficult it is for us to conceive of what might be beyond that which is familiar and safe and - even in the cases of difficult and rapidly implemented reforms - that which is, ironically, somehow predictable.

In order for education to be responsive, relevant, and forward-moving, we must be willing to challenge our assumptions, question our own preconceptions, and begin to envision schooling as radically transformed. In this way, the potential exists to affect deep and positive change, for example, by interrupting the reproduction of problematic values and negative conditions which can be found in existing school structures: inequality, inflexibility, hierarchy, power relationships, and claim over authority and expertise. Moreover, by breaking away from the constraints imposed by the 'walls' of the school building, we recognize that learning does not only happen within the confines of the traditional classroom or its off-site equivalent, and that teaching is not the sole domain, nor is it the sole responsibility, of the professional educator. In order for education to be truly responsive and truly public, in addition to our present understandings of partnerships and shared responsibility as the 'community in the school', we must also start envisioning the 'school in the community'. Perhaps this will require us to think of education in more abstract terms - as an institution or entity *of* society - rather than in terms of the school in its concrete or physical form. As such, we may be better able to move beyond merely inviting others 'in' and merely making connections to the 'outside'.

Third, consistent with the above conception of education beyond the school, is the understanding of education in a holistic sense - as integrated and implicitly connected to a larger community. Our present notions of schools as primarily separate from the rest of society renders education disconnected and disassociated from the 'real' world of our children. Furthermore, schools, as isolated institutions, prevent students from developing the significant connections they need in order to understand themselves as holding important membership within an interdependent whole. As an essential component of a wider ecosystem, schools must be integrated and incorporated with all other societal institutions and organizations. This conception sees educational institutions as learning organizations within a larger learning collective, where the focus is on active inquiry, critical thinking, constructed knowledge, generative curriculum, and lifelong learning for the benefit of not only the individual but, moreover, the entire society. Further, the interconnections and ties between the school and the community forge relationships necessary in nurturing values of mutuality, reciprocity, and interdependence - values which are essential if education is to indeed be public.

The ideals presented above are just that - ideals. Embracing these concepts as possibilities for reform requires that we radically 'rethink' public education. Then, beyond thinking, we must act. Change of this type does not happen overnight, nor does it begin on a large scale. It starts at a 'grassroots' or school level, with small groups of individuals who are most closely or directly connected to children, and it moves slowly and incrementally. It is motivated by what is in the best interests of students, and it focuses on teaching and learning. In this light, Hargreaves (1999) talks about deep, meaningful, and lasting reform. He argues that parents, together with teachers, form a powerful alliance. By starting out small, and continually and consistently advocating on behalf of children, this alliance can secure the support and force required to launch a full-fledged social movement. This movement, he argues, stands to carry with it impact and consequence of the magnitude advanced by the environmental movement of the 60s and 70s which resulted in fundamental changes in the way we do things and in the way we see our world and ourselves within that world. Hargreaves suggests that it is only through this type movement, and its initial grassroots activism, that we can hope to change the way our schools are viewed so that education will be seen by all as critically important and essentially public.

As mentioned earlier, the kind of public education envisioned above is not entirely original. This conception incorporates or is formed, to a degree, by several ideas presented in current reform literature. For example, conceptions of democratization have been advanced by authors such as Aronowitz and Giroux (1991, 1993), Darling-Hammond (1997), Gutmann (1987), Kanpol (1992), and McLaren (1993). The 'systems thinking' behind understandings of schools as within intricately connected ecosystems is reflected in the work of Beare and Slaughter (1993), Fullan (1993), and Hargreaves (1994), and ideas related to learning organizations and learning societies can be attributed to those such as Senge (1990) and Sergiovanni (1994).

'Going Global' in Leadership Learning

As stated at the beginning of our paper, we would like to draw some links between our own research to offer, in addition to the above contributions, yet another way to think about or to approach educational leadership in the 21st Century. We would like to suggest that, if the desire to move forward - to look beyond local contexts of reform toward an understanding of globalization that includes a view broader than, for example, an economic perspective - is as important as those who participated in the Alberta study say it is, educational leaders must not only have opportunities to think and talk about global considerations *locally*, they must also have opportunities to think and talk about global considerations *globally*. We agree with learning theorists (e.g. Bruner, Vygotsky) who argued that meaning is socially constructed and that understanding is developed through interactions with others, and we also agree with social theorists (e.g. Foucault, Corson) who argued that knowledge is socially reproduced through language. As such, we suggest that leadership learning include global interactions which, in turn, promote global discourses and global ways of understanding and knowing. Through activities that transcend the traditional and localized notions of education, alternative possibilities can be conceived. In short, we suggest that educational leaders 'go global'.

When we review our research in Alberta (Spencer, 1999) and our international research (Robertson & Webber, 1999; Webber & Hunter, 1999;; Webber & Robertson, 1998) we are able to see a challenge in the former and a possibility in the latter. In light of this, we want to link the local Alberta experience with a broader context by offering some suggestions for 'going global'. The recent research of Webber and his colleagues presents a strong case for the use of technology in making the kinds of global or international connections important in transcending local political, economic, and institutional boundaries.

The International Research

As much as the participants in our Alberta study saw global educational change having an economic base, they also saw technology as a major force of change. That is, recent information and communication technology makes it possible for young people to communicate, gather information, and socialize globally to a degree never before possible. In fact, large numbers of students and their families may perceive schools as useful, not for their educative function, but more for their credentialing, social, and custodial functions (Webber, 2000). In other words, technology is a force with a potential to disrupt drastically the form and function of schools just as it has disrupted the practices of large numbers of businesses (Christenson, 1997). Therefore, if educational reforms of the past two decades have both economic and technological bases, then it is critical that educators, especially educational leaders, possess the skills and knowledge that will allow them to participate meaningfully in the monumental reshaping of education caused by technology..

To that end, Webber and Hunter (1999) suggested that forms of electronic communication, such as Internet discussions and online courses, designed to encourage cross-cultural and cross-role

dialogue among educational leaders worldwide, promote not only deeper understandings of local school communities but, more importantly, also foster richer conceptions of educational issues within a global context. These issues include leadership obligation domains that transcend both cultural and political boundaries: culture building, shared governance, professional growth, basic accountability, rich accountability, imaging of alternatives, and change agency. Clearly, overlapping leadership networks at local, regional, national, and international levels make the Internet, for example, an accessible and affordable site for the type of 'think tank' activity necessary for those interested in generating new ideas and approaches to educational change from a global perspective.

Similarly, the leadership development research of Robertson and Webber (1999) and Webber and Robertson (1998) described a "Boundary Breaking Leadership Model" designed to offer an alternative to traditional, local forms of leadership learning in the promotion of cross-cultural, on-line collaborative Internet projects. The "desired outcomes" of this model are the "development of a critical perspective that can be applied to participants' professional contexts and to new information," a movement beyond the self that includes the "the ability to consider multiple perspectives, and to resist the categorization of people into we and they," and the development of a sense of agency in "participants' ability to make changes in their professional environments" (Webber, 2000, p. 6). In addition, participants involved in a related research project (Webber & Robertson, 1998) identified several benefits to this type of leadership learning, including opportunities for (a) gaining critical perspectives for thinking about local, national, and international education policies, (b) disseminating leadership information and literature on a international basis, (c) reflecting upon and questioning one's own values, culture, and assumptions, and critically examining one's own practice, (d) developing a strong sense of global community, and (e) imagining new possibilities and creative alternatives by continually focusing on the 'big picture'. These findings clearly indicate that global opportunities for learning encourage the kind of larger understandings that prepare educational leaders to think and to talk in new ways and to challenge what is taken-for-granted in present conceptions of reform.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we do not wish to suggest that technology is the only tool educational leaders might use when considering change; it is but one tool which offers viable access to an international arena of dialogue and debate at a time when, more than ever, global perspectives are needed and when, more than ever, such opportunities are restricted by funding and program cuts. Nor do with wish to suggest that a 'global' view is the only view necessary in the struggle for reform. Indeed, increasingly crucial in today's postmodern societies is recognizing the unique and particular needs of local school communities. Rather, what we are advocating is a strategy that can be seen as one among many and, most importantly, as an approach which requires that we lift ourselves above that which limits us in the day-to-day management of, for example, the bothersome, short-sighted or narrow reform initiatives we must deal with, and allows us to begin conceiving of public education in the way the Albertans of our first study envisioned it - on a global and societal level - concerned not only with economic imperatives, but also with the imperatives of social justice in a wider community.

Further, our observations of school reform in Alberta suggest that educational leaders challenge their beliefs and assumptions and lead us to questions in several key areas:

- How can the international components of teacher education and graduate programs at postsecondary institutions be made most meaningful?
- How might we reconceptualize the structure and function of schools to maximize the possibilities offered by information and communication technologies?

- How might we promote recognition that educators' traditionally conservative assumptions about schooling may precipitate a perceived need for imposed change by legislators?
- What is the most effective way of acknowledging that the limited capacity of public schools to change quickly may challenge even schools' credentialing, social, and custodial functions.

In order for public education to be truly responsive to the needs of today's children or to even survive as a relevant public institution, we must be willing to push the limits of our own preconceptions and to envision schooling as different from its present forms. Opportunities that allow us to break away from the immediate challenges and difficulties we face in our own school communities - even if only for brief interludes - to go beyond thinking and talking about change on a local level to thinking and talking about change on a global level, encourage relevant and original ideas - conceptions crucial for transforming education in the 21st Century.

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